

# With Edged Tools

By HENRY SETON MERRIMAN  
Author of "The Sowers," "Roden's Corner," "From  
One Generation to Another," Etc.

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"I am," she admitted, with some surprise. "I wonder how you knew I am afraid of him."

"I can reassure you on that score," said Meredith. "For the next two years or so Durnovo will be in daily intercourse with me. He will be under my immediate eye. I did not anticipate much pleasure from his society, but now I do."

"Why?" she asked, rather mystified. "Because I shall have the daily satisfaction of knowing that I am relieving you of an anxiety."

"It is very kind of you to put it in that way," said Jocelyn. "But I should not like you to sacrifice yourself to what may be a foolish prejudice on my part."

"It is not a foolish prejudice," Durnovo is not a gentleman, either by birth or inclination. He is not fit to associate with you."

To this Jocelyn answered nothing. Victor Durnovo was one of her brother's closest friends; a friend of his own choosing.

"Miss Gordon," said Meredith suddenly, with a gravity that was rare, "will you do me a favor?"

"I think I should like to," she said. "You admit that you are afraid of Durnovo now; if at any time you have reason to be more afraid, will you make use of me? Will you write or come to me and ask my help?"

"Thank you," she said hesitatingly. "You see," he went on in a lighter tone, "I am not afraid of Durnovo. I have met Durnovo before. You may have observed that my locks no longer resemble the raven's wing. There is a little gray, just here, above the temple. I am getting on in life, and I know how to deal with Durnovos."

"Do you know," she said, after a little silence, "that I was actually thinking of warning you against Mr. Durnovo? Now I stand against at my own presumption."

"It was kind of you to give the matter any thought whatever."

He rose and threw away the end of his cigar. Joseph was already before the door, leading the horse which Maurice Gordon had placed at his visitor's disposal.

## CHAPTER X.

THE short equatorial twilight was drawing to an end, and all nature stood in silence, while night crept up to claim the land where her reign is more autocratic than elsewhere on earth. There was a black night above the trees, and a blacker beneath.

A sportsman was abroad. He was creeping up the right hand bank of a stream, his only chance lying in the noise of the waters which might serve to deaden the sound of broken twig or rustling leaf.

This sportsman was Jack Meredith, and it was evident that he was bringing to bear upon the matter in hand that intelligence and keenness of perception which had made him a person of some prominence in other scenes where nature has a less assured place.

Since sunset he had been crawling, scrambling, stumbling up the bank of this stream in relentless pursuit of some large animal which persistently kept hidden in the tangle across the bed of the river. The strange part of it was that when he stopped to peep through the branches the animal stopped, too, and he found no way of discovering its whereabouts.

Once Meredith was able to decide approximately the whereabouts of his prey by the momentary shaking of a twig. He raised his rifle and covered that twig steadily; his forefinger played tentatively on the trigger, but on second thought he refrained. He was keenly conscious of the fact that the beast was doing its work with skill superior to his own. In comparison to his, its movements were almost noiseless.

It was terribly hot and all the while night was stalking westward on the summits of the trees with stealthy tread.

At last he came to an open space made by a slip of the land into the bed of the river. When Jack Meredith came to this he stepped out of the thicket and stood in the open awaiting the approach of his stealthy prey. The sound of its footfall was just perceptible, slowly diminishing the distance that divided them. Then the trees were parted and a tall, fair man stepped forward on to the opposite bank.

Jack Meredith bowed gravely, and the other sportsman, seeing the absurdity of the situation, burst into hearty laughter. In a moment or two he had leaped from rock to rock and come to Meredith.

"It seems," he said, "that we have been waiting a considerable amount of time."

"I very nearly wasted powder and shot," replied Jack, significantly indicating his rifle.

"I saw you twice and raised my rifle. Your breeches are just the color of a young doe. Are you Meredith? My name is Oscar."

"Ah! Yes, I am Meredith. I am glad to see you."

They shook hands. There was a twinkle in Jack Meredith's eyes, but Oscar was quite grave. His sense of humor was not very keen, and he was before all things a sportsman.

"I left the canoe a mile below Maala and landed to shoot a deer we saw drinking, but I never saw him afterward. Then I heard you, and I have been stalking you ever since."

"But I never expected you so soon. You were not due till—look!" Jack whispered suddenly.

Oscar turned on his heel, and the next instant two rifles rang out through the forest stillness in one sharp crack. Across the stream, ten yards behind the spot where Oscar had emerged from the brush, a leopard sprang into the air five feet from the ground, with head thrown back and paws clawing at the thinness of space

with grand free sweeps. The beast fell with a thud and lay still, dead.

The two men clambered across the rocks again, side by side. While they stood over the prostrate form of the leopard, beautiful, incomparably graceful and sleek even in death, Guy Oscar stole a sidelong glance at his companion. He was a modest man, and yet he knew that he was reckoned among the big game hunters of the age. This man had fired as quickly as himself, and there were two small trickling holes in the animal's head.

While he was being quietly scrutinized Jack Meredith stooped down and, taking the leopard beneath the shoulders, lifted it bodily back from the pool of blood.

"Pity to spoil the skin," he explained as he put a fresh cartridge into his rifle.

Oscar nodded in an approving way. He knew the weight of a full grown leopard, all muscle and bone, and he was one of those old fashioned persons mentioned in the Scriptures as taking a delight in a man's legs—or his arms, so long as they were strong.

"I suppose," he said quietly, "we had better skin him here."

"Yes."

They laid the skin out on the trampled maidenhair and contemplated it with silent satisfaction. In the course of their inspection they both arrived at the head at the same moment. The two holes in the hide, just above the eyes, came under their notice at the same moment, and they turned and smiled gravely at each other, thinking the same thought—the sort of thought that Englishmen rarely put into intelligible English.

"I'm glad we did that," said Guy Oscar at length; suddenly, "Whatever comes of this expedition of ours—if we fight, as we probably shall, before it is finished—if we hate each other ever afterward, that skin ought to remind us that we are much of a muchness."

By 9 o'clock they reached the camp at Maala. Victor Durnovo was still at work superintending the discharge of the baggage and stores from the large trading canoes. They heard the shouting and chattering before coming in sight of the camp, and one voice raised angrily above the others.

"Is that Durnovo's voice?" asked Meredith.

"Yes," answered his companion curtly.

It was a new voice, which Meredith had not heard before. When they shouted to announce their arrival it was suddenly hushed, and presently Durnovo came forward to greet them.

Meredith hardly knew him, he was so much stronger and healthier in appearance. Durnovo shook hands heartily.

"No need to introduce you two," he said, looking from one to the other.

"No; after one mistake we discovered each other's identity in the forest," answered Meredith.

Durnovo smiled, but there was something behind the smile. He did not seem to approve of their meeting without his intervention.

The three men walked up toward the house together. It was a fair sized house, with a heavy thatched roof that overhung the walls like the crown of a mushroom. The walls were only mud, and the thatching was nothing else than banana leaves, but there was evidence of European taste in the garden surrounding the structure and in the glazed windows and wooden door.

As they approached the open doorway three little children, clad in very little more than their native modesty, ran gleefully out and proceeded to engage seats on Jack Meredith's boots, looking upon him as a mere public conveyance. They took hardly any notice of him, but chattered and quarreled among themselves, sometimes in baby English, sometimes in dialect unknown to Oscar and Meredith.

"These," said the latter, when they were seated and clinging with their little dusky arms round his legs, "are the very runniest little kids I ever came across."

Durnovo gave an impatient laugh and went on toward the house. But Guy Oscar stopped and walked more slowly beside Meredith as he labored along heavily footed.

"They are the jolliest little souls imaginable," continued Jack Meredith. "There," he said, "when they had reached the house they were away

to you mother—very fine ride—no, no more tonight! I'm weary, you understand, weary!"

"Aweary, aweary!" repeated the little things, standing before him in infantile nude rotundity, looking up with bright eyes.

"Aweary, that is it. Good night, Epaminondas; good night, Xantippe! Give ye good hap, most stout Nestor!"

He stooped and gravely shook hands with each one in turn, and, after forcing a like ceremonial upon Guy Oscar, they reluctantly withdrew.

"They have not joined us, I suppose," said Oscar as he followed his companion into the house.

"Not yet. They live in this place. Nestor, I understand, takes care of his mother, who in her turn takes care of this house. He is one and a half."

Guy Oscar seemed to have inherited the mind inquisitive from his learned father. He asked another question later on.

"Who is that woman?" he said during dinner, with a little nod toward the doorway through which the object of his curiosity had passed with some plates.

"That is the mother of the stout Nestor," answered Jack—"Durnovo's housekeeper."

He spoke quietly, looking straight in front of him; and Joseph, who was drawing a cork at the back of the room, was watching his face.

There was a little pause, during which Durnovo drank slowly. Then Guy Oscar spoke again.

"If she cooked the dinner," he said, "she knows her business."

"Yes," answered Durnovo, "she is a good cook, if she is nothing else."

It did not sound as if further inquiries would be welcome, and so the subject was dropped with a silent tribute to the culinary powers of Durnovo's housekeeper at the Maala station.

The woman had only appeared for a moment, bringing in some dishes for Joseph—a tall, stately woman, with great dark eyes, in which the patience of motherhood had succeeded to the soft fire of West Indian love and youth. She had the graceful slow carriage of the creole, although her skin was darker than that of those dangerous sirens.

"They call me," she had said to Jack Meredith in her soft, mumbled English a fortnight earlier, "they call me Marie."

The children he had named after his own fantasy, and when she had once seen him with them there was a notable change in her manner. Her eyes rested on him with a sort of wondering attention, and when she cooked his meals or touched anything that was his there was something in her attitude that denoted special care.

Joseph called her "missa," with a sort of friendliness in his voice which never rose to badinage nor descended to familiarity.

The man who had found the simlacine was eager, restless, full of suspicion. To the others the scheme obviously presented itself in a different light. Jack Meredith was dilatory, light hearted and unsatisfactory. It was impossible to arouse any enthusiasm in him, to make him take it seriously. Guy Oscar was gravely indifferent. He wanted to get rid of a certain space of time, and the African forest, containing as it did the only excitement that his large heart knew, was as good a place as any. The simlacine was, in his mind, relegated to a distant place behind weeks of sport and adventure such as his soul loved.

"You men," said Durnovo eagerly, "don't seem to take the thing seriously."

"I," answered Meredith, "intend, at all events, to take the profits very seriously. When they begin to come in, J. Meredith will be at the above address, and trusts by a careful attention to business to merit a continuance of your kind patronage."

Durnovo laughed somewhat nervously. Oscar did not seem to hear.

"It is all very well for you," said the half caste in a lower voice. "You have not so much at stake. It is likely that the happiness of my whole life depends upon this venture."

A curious smile passed across Jack Meredith's face. Without turning his head he glanced sideways into Durnovo's face through the gloom. But he said nothing, and it was Oscar who broke the silence by saying simply:

"The same may possibly apply to me."

There was a little pause, during which he lighted his pipe.

It did not seem to occur to any of them that the only person whose individuality was still veiled happened to be Jack Meredith. He alone had said nothing. He it was who spoke first, after a proper period of silence.

"It seems to me," he said, "that we have all the technicalities arranged now. So far as the working of the expedition is concerned we know our places, and the difficulties will be met as they present themselves. But there is one thing which I think we should set in order now. I have been thinking about it while I have been waiting here alone."

The glow of Victor Durnovo's cigar died away as if in his attention he was forgetting to smoke; but he said nothing.

"It seems to me," Jack went on, "that before we leave here we should draw up and sign a sort of deed of partnership. Of course we trust each other perfectly—there is no question of that. But life is an uncertain thing, as some earlier philosopher said 'before me; and one never knows what may happen. I have drawn up a paper in triplicate. If you have a match I will read it to you."

Oscar produced a match and, striking it on his boot, sheltered it with the hollow of his hand while Jack read:

"We, the undersigned, hereby enter into partnership to search for and sell to our mutual profit the herb known as simlacine, the profits to be divided into three equal portions, after the deduction of one hundredth part to be handed to the servant, Joseph Atkinson. Any further expenses that may be incurred to be borne in the same proportion as the original expense of fitting out the expedition—namely, two-fifths to be paid by Guy Craven Oscar, two-fifths by Guy Meredith, one-fifth by Victor Durnovo."

"The sum of £50 per month to be paid to Victor Durnovo, who, with he may pay the thirty special men taken from his estate and held

quarters at Maala to cultivate the simlacine, and such corn and vegetables as may be required for the subsistence of the expedition; these men to act as porters until the plateau be reached."

The opinion of two of the three leaders against one to be accepted unconditionally in all questions where controversy may arise. In case of death each of us undertakes hereby to hand over to the executor of the dead partner or partners such moneys as shall belong to him or them."

At this juncture there was a little pause while Guy Oscar lighted a second match.

"And," continued Jack, "we hereby undertake severally on oath to hold the secret of the whereabouts of the simlacine a strict secret, which secret may not be revealed by any one of us, to whomsoever it may be, without the sanction, in writing, of the other two partners."

"There," concluded Jack Meredith, "I am rather pleased with that literary production. It is forcible and yet devoid of violence. I feel that in the commerce of the century has lost an ornament. Moreover, I am ready to swear to the terms of the agreement."

There was a little pause. Guy Oscar took his pipe from his mouth, and while he knocked the ashes out against the leg of his chair he mumbled, "I swear to hold to that agreement."

Victor Durnovo took off his hat with a sweep and a flourish, and, raising his barred brow to the stars, he said: "I swear to hold to that agreement. If I fail, may God strike me dead!"

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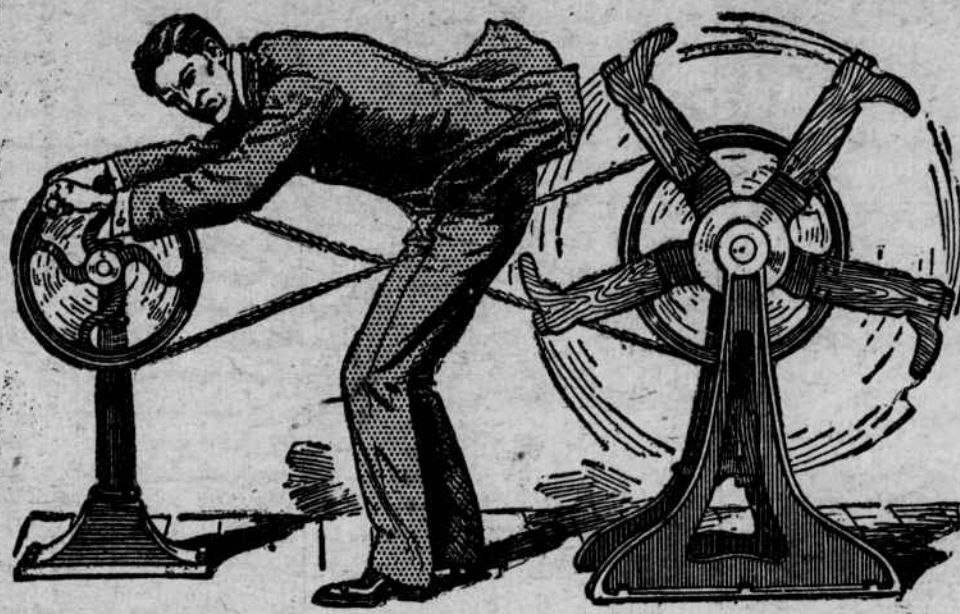
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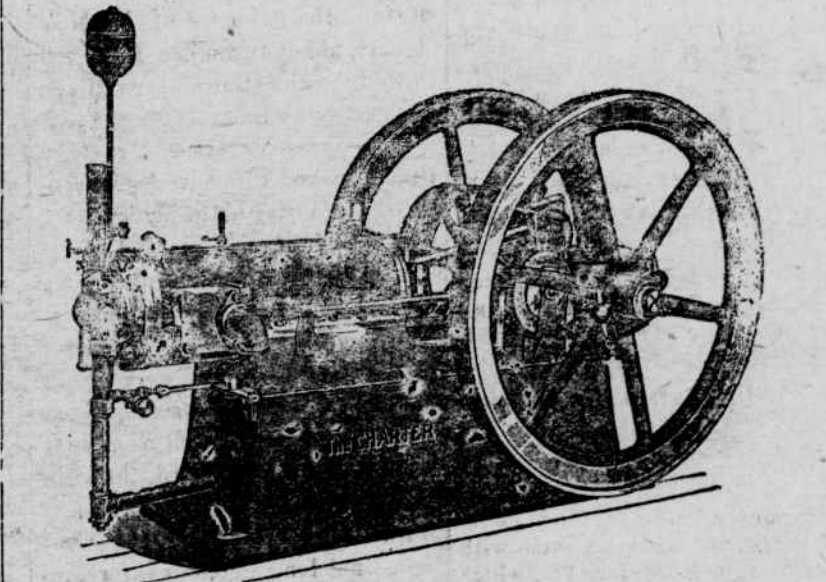


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